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State, federal incentives for renewable energy cheer solar power companies

By Lee Shearer 1/15/2009

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ATHENS BANNER-HERALD

After years of struggling, 2009 finally could be the year that solar energy takes off in Georgia - or so Tim Blackwell hopes.

Until recently, the economic numbers didn't make sense for many businesses and homeowners, said Blackwell, an Oglethorpe County man who started a solar installation company named OneWorld Sustainable with Keith Freeman in 2002. The payback in savings from solar energy took too long to justify the expense for most homeowners and businesses in Georgia.

But new federal and state tax credits have changed the equation, said Blackwell as he watched workers installing solar panels Wednesday at the federal Environmental Protection Agency campus on College Station Road.

"The numbers are starting to look appealing to most people out there," said Blackwell, who expects OneWorld to reach \$4 million in sales this year.

The new appeal of solar stems from two recent government decisions, said Fred Fox, president of Fox Independent Energy LLC, an Atlanta company that analyzes and advises business owners thinking about going solar.

First, the state legislature last year approved a 35 percent tax credit for homeowners and businesses that install solar energy systems. And last fall, Congress not only extended a 30 percent solar tax credit for eight years, but eliminated a \$2,000 cap on the tax credit.

But the national economic troubles have been a dark spot for solar, Fox said. "The financial crisis hit right when the booster engines were lit," he said.

Agencies like the EPA don't get government tax breaks - they are the government - but EPA administrators approved a 9.2-kilowatt solar energy system there to comply with a 2007 presidential order to improve energy efficiency and use more energy from renewable sources such as solar.

The system also is consistent with the EPA's mission of protecting the environment, said Candida West, deputy director of the EPA Office of Research and Development's Ecosystems Research Division located at the campus.





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"The agency strives to set a good example for green energy, consistent with our mission," West said. As more homeowners, businesses and even government agencies go solar, the Georgia Power Co. is looking to buy more sun-generated electricity for customers who want to buy energy from renewable sources, said utility company spokeswoman Lynn Wallace.

Despite the new incentives, the future of the solar power industry in Georgia remains uncertain, said Ben Browning, an owner of Marietta's Georgia Solar Power Co.

"Where do we go in solar in the next 12 months? That's all going to depend on what the new (Obama) administration is going to do. If they live up to their promises, solar could take way off," Browning said.

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